

**Testimony of
Mr. Brent Jackson, Autryville, NC
U.S. House Agriculture Committee, Fayetteville, NC Farm Bill Field Hearing
Monday, February 6, 2006**

Introduction

Good afternoon Chairman Goodlatte, Ranking Member Peterson, members of the Committee. My name is Brent Jackson. I am President and CEO of Jackson Farming Company, which is located in Autryville, North Carolina, in Sampson County, and I thank you for this opportunity to express my views on the upcoming farm bill concerning fruits and vegetables from a North Carolina perspective. We are growers and shippers of fresh fruits, vegetables, and grains. We also own two small country elevators that currently operate for the purchasing and storage of corn, soybeans, and small grains, for our farm and other area farmers. We currently grow 1,200 acres of double-cropped black plastic with drip irrigation for our watermelons, cantaloupes, strawberries, pumpkins, squash and cucumbers. We also grow approximately 2,000 acres of corn, soybeans, and wheat. Jackson Farming Company is celebrating its 25th anniversary this year, and our mainstay has always been our production and marketing of fresh fruits and vegetables.

Industry Overview

If we were to ask a random group of North Carolinians to describe North Carolina agriculture, I suspect that most comments would relate to our state's tobacco or animal agriculture industries. For those members of the Committee who are not familiar with North Carolina agriculture, let me tell you that there is more to our state's agricultural economy than meets the eye.

North Carolina boasts the nation's third most diversified agriculture economy. Our specialty crops production – including tobacco production – is valued at about \$ 2 billion at the farm gate. We lead the nation in sweet potato and tobacco production. We rank second in Christmas tree production; third in pickling cucumbers and trout; and fourth in blueberries, greenhouse & nursery production and strawberries.

Over the years the produce industry in North Carolina has gone through tremendous changes in an effort to remain profitable. The cost of production for 2006 is at an all time high due to the current fuel situation, and government regulations and mandates. Our markets are becoming more and more consolidated because our customers, the retail chains, have either merged or just gone away due to the competitive

nature of the industry. In the past, we in the fruit and vegetable industry have not received Farm Bill payments or subsidies. Nor do I suggest subsidies today! This afternoon I will present four points for the Committee to consider as Congress starts working on the next Farm Bill.

First, as mentioned earlier, Fruits and Vegetables have benefited little over the years from the previous farm bills, which we hope is going to change. There are two programs currently in place that need to remain for our industry. **1. Keep the current planting prohibition in place.** U.S. farm policy should not distort our fruit and vegetable markets by allowing production of fruit and vegetables on program acreage. As some members of the Committee may know, a 1% increase in plantings could reduce prices by 4%. This is simply a matter of equity and I urge you to maintain this long-standing policy.

Second, help specialty crop farmers mitigate risk through realistic and affordable crop insurance. The Non-Insured Crop Disaster Assistance Program (NAP) has provided growers with a reliable, albeit minimum source of coverage. But specialty crop farmers lack a consistent crop insurance program. In some cases, NAP has proven to be a better deal than the some crop insurance products. We ask Congress to craft a crop insurance proposal that is realistic, honest and affordable to help us to manage our risk.

Third, invest in a specialty crops infrastructure. Specifically, there are three areas in which Congress should invest.

Research/extension and Pest Research: By virtue of its outstanding research and extension programs, North Carolina State University (and NC A&T) is an indispensable part of North Carolina fruit and vegetable production. So are the USDA Research facilities and federal agencies such as the Animal Plant Health and Inspection Service (APHIS), the entity charged with keeping pests out of our country. Specialty crop producers depend on these agriculture research institutions and phytosanitary departments. .

School Lunch Programs for Fruits and Vegetables: North Carolina has enjoyed an active School Lunch program that includes fruit and vegetables. The next Farm Bill should expand this program to all 50 states. Obesity is an epidemic among our children. Providing children with nutritious fruits and vegetables will arm them with healthy eating habits. As these children grow up, those habits will pay off in the form of reduced health care costs.

Specialty Crops program funding for Production and Marketing: Some in the fruit and vegetable industry view the block grants authorized in the Specialty Crops Competitiveness Act as a vehicle for enabling local investment in specialty crops. As Congress' Farm Bill discussions mature, I am certain this issue will receive a great deal of attention. As you weigh the options relating to possible expansion of the Act in the next Farm Bill, I urge the Committee to carefully consider the manner in which these block grants funds will be distributed.

Mr. Chairman, my final point touches on an overall issue the Committee must consider. That is, Congress must realize that the next Farm Bill has the potential to prevent or speed up the outsourcing of our agriculture economy. Producers face significant challenges due to high energy and labor costs. Candidly, labor concerns are our top worry these days. For me, labor costs are a make or break issue with regard to my long-term profitability. If Congress passes an immigration and border security bill that ignores the unique needs of agriculture, it will strip \$5 to \$9 billion dollars out of the fruit and vegetable industry and send those dollars and jobs into the hands of our foreign competitors. These offshore producers do not face the same regulatory burdens as U.S. producers. **The number one threat to American agriculture today is the shortage and lack of a dependable and legal workforce.**

Mr. Chairman and committee members, I challenge Congress to write a Farm Bill that emphasizes the best that American agriculture has to offer to consumers, society and our economy. Do not allow it to become a hammer that could destroy our nation's small businesses and rural communities. I believe that we are at a crossroads in history, and we must make the difficult, but right choices now.

I appreciate the opportunity to testify before this committee, and I look forward to answering your questions.